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HISTORY OF SALINE

by Bessie Collins

The history of Saline is as interesting and romantic as a story book. The name was derived from the salt springs, or "salt licks," located near the river and the southwest present city limits. The river and township were also named Saline. The salt springs were well known in the early days, for six Indian trails converged there, and because of the river, which was navigable for canoes from Lake Erie by way of the Raisin River to the salt springs, many tribes in their nomadic life occupied this area at different times. These trails were worn by human feet as the Indians went from village to village or upon hunting expeditions, and the deer and other animals followed the same paths coming from their feeding grounds to the river. An Indian village was located near there, also a mound and burying ground. For many years farmers, as they cultivated their fields, found relics of Indian life to substantiate this statement. It was near the Great Sauk Trail, from Detroit to the Northwest Territory, now U.S. 112, which was traveled by early French explorers and traders, and we are told that Gen. Anthony Wayne and a part of his army wintered there in the winter of 1794-5. Game was plentiful, and they made salt and rested before the spring campaign against the Indians.

Saline owes its origin to Orange Risdon, who was born in Vermont and raised in New York State, where he began the study of surveying at the age of thirteen. He assisted in laying out several cities, including Buffalo, and then came to Michigan. He was chief surveyor of the Detroit to Pontiac road and probably much of southern Michigan was surveyed under his direction, for all land had to be mapped before it was open to purchase by early settlers. He was attracted to this section of the country, located on the principal east-west trail, on a river for water power, with fertile land and surrounded by forests for lumber and fuel. So he purchased 160 acres on August 12, 1824, then continued his occupation as chief surveyor of the government road from Detroit to Chicago, called the Chicago Turnpike, now U.S. 112, and did not return for five years.

In the meantime Leonard Miller and family came from New York State in 1826 and erected a log cabin on the east side of the Saline River near the salt springs, near the present Saline-Milan road. Soon Daniel Cross came and built a cabin nearby.

In 1826 the brothers, Orrin and Chester Parsons, came and took up land farther down the river and on the west side, and each built a log cabin, the property in later years known as the Depuy farm. An interesting letter written by Mrs. Chester Parsons to relatives in the East tells about their trip from New York State and how, after selecting a home site, her husband and his brother Orrin started on foot for Monroe to register their land before someone else claimed it, traveling by night and day to do so.

Their arrival had a great influence, for they erected the first saw mill in 1827, and also cut a road to Monroe, for all provisions had to come from there or Detroit. In 1829 Orrin Parsons built the first frame house a short distance north for his daughter Melissa, who married A. D. Summers. This house is still standing and occupied by Mrs. Rudy Schmaier and family. In 1836 Orrin Parsons built the first grist mill on the river, which was operated later by his sons Horace and Roswell. His son Orrin had a large lumber business. All of the bricks used in the early buildings in Saline were also made on the Parsons farm.

Chester Parsons had moved in 1834, taking up land west on The Turnpike, and kept a public house opposite the present Polar Bear Inn. The Benton Post Office was located in his house and he was postmaster, and it was the terminal of the Saline-Ypsilanti stage coach route. In 1847 he built a saw mill, the first to use steam, and after that mill burned, he built another. His daughter Melissa married Charles Fellows, and their daughter Rebecca later married the stage coach driver, Edwin Wallace. This inn was later used as a home for many years but was torn down in 1954 to make way for a modern house.

Orange Risdon returned to Saline in 1829 and built a frame house on the hill overlooking the road he had surveyed and also the river. The first post office was in his home and he was postmaster for ten years; also the first store, for Silas Finch came from New York State to open a store, and no other place being available, Mr. Risdon rented him his parlor. Mr. Risdon was also justice of the peace, and in his home the first town meeting was held the first Monday of April, 1830. He performed the first marriage ceremony in the new settlement, which took place at Benton, Mrs. Risdon accompanying him on horseback, riding postillion.

The village of Saline was platted in September, 1832, on part of his land, and he gave land for building of churches and the first cemetery. Mr. Risdon lived there until his death in 1876 and the home remained in the family of his daughter, Harriette Mead, until 1924, when the remaining land was purchased by Saline for a park and an addition to the cemetery, and the house was purchased in 1948 by Erwin Schmid, moved to West Henry Street, and made into three apartments.

After homes were established, the sturdy pioneer's first consideration was a place to worship God. Ten Baptists met December 30, 1830, at the home of Jesse and Lucy Stevens to consider forming a church, and on February 9, 1831, brethren from the Ypsilanti and Plymouth churches came to fellowship them as the First Baptist Church in Saline. They worshiped in homes, then a school house, until 1837 when their church was built on land given by Mr. Risdon. Two

years later a parsonage was built just south of the church. A new and more modern structure was dedicated February 5, 1905, and after union withthe Presbyterians in the Federated Church June 5, 1919, this church was sold and remodeled as a residence. Eventually it became the Saline General Hospital in 1933 and since last summer has been the Saline Convalescent Hospital. The parsonage was sold for a home, then purchased in 1937 by the late Henry Ford, who became interested in it because it was the birthplace of his friend, George Matthew Adams, whose father was Baptist minister from 1876-1879. It was a perfect example of the early American home and was razed and re-erected in Greenfield Village, where it is known as the Adams House.

The Presbyterian Church was organized May 21, 1831, by twelve members of the Newark, New York church before starting for their new homes in Michigan. They immediately reorganized upon arriving in Saline July 18th, and built a church in 1842, similar in architecture to the Baptist church. It was replaced in 1898 by the present brick structure. Both the Baptist and Presbyterian churches have just celebrated their 125th anniversaries.

The Methodist Church was organized February 12, 1833, by Rev. Davidson and one member, Mrs. Ansyl Ford, and an interested congregation who soon became members. Mr. Risdon gave land and they built a small church where the Herman Heininger house now stands on South Lewis Street. Three years later it was struck by lightning during service and two men killed and the building burned. A new and larger edifice similar to the other churches was then erected on land given by Mr. Risdon on the corner across from the Baptist Church. It was replaced in 1899 by the present brick church.

The first settlers had come from New York State, but in the sixties many families from Germany settled on farms around Saline, so in 1865 a Lutheran Church was organized. They held services in the Baptist Church until their church was built in 1872, the present Trinity Lutheran Church. Part of the members of that church organized the St. Paul's Evangelical and Reformed Church and dedicated their building in 1908. The first Church of Christ Scientist disbanded in 1932 after conducting services and a reading room for thirty-four years in Saline. Since the number of Catholic families in the area has increased in recent years, they built a modern church, St. Andrew's, dedicating it September 13, 1953.

Small district schools had been built, the first erected west on the Turnpike in 1831. The first school in the village was a one-room building erected for $500 on the site of the first Methodist Church, and when a larger building became necessary a two story brick school was erected in 1852 on the corner across the street. The graded system was adopted in 1865. Then a three story brick school house (which many will remember) was completed in 1868. After four generations had attended this school, it was replaced with a larger and more modern building which was dedicated December 5, 1930. Again this schoolhouse became inadequate to meet the increasing requirements of education, so it was remodeled for a junior and senior high school and a new twenty-room elementary school was built ready for school in the fall of 1955.

Although the early settlers accommodated travelers when nightfall overtook them, the first hotel, the American House, was built in 1833, located on the site of the present bowling alley and adjacent stores on East Michigan Avenue. It continued in business until 1879, then was used as a residence before being torn down. Back of it was a livery stable from which hacks met the trains and horses and buggies or carriages for rental were stabled.

Daniel Wallace and family came from New York State in 1831 and took up land three miles west on the Turnpike, and three years later built a hotel, the Exchange, where the Weidman Tractor Sales now stands. The son, Daniel D., assisted with the hotel, also operated a lumber yard and at one time was proprietor of the York Mills, a mile south of town, which had been built in 1836 by Mose Rider. The son of Daniel D. Wallace, Edwin, drove the stage coach. This hotel was also used later for a residence before being torn down.

The present hotel was built by D. S. Haywood for his home, but size and location seemed better for a hotel, so it was operated for a time as "the Goodrich House" by A. H. Goodrich. Also Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Davenport occupied it while their mansion, now occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Curtiss, was being built. After changing hands several times, it was owned by Anson Harmon longer than anyone else before it was purchased by Henry Leutheuser, now Mayor of Saline.

Silas Finch built the first store in the village in 1832 and moved his goods from the Risdon home. It was a two story building, owned for many years by John McKinnon for a tailor shop, then occupied by other stores, including a millinery shop, until it was razed for the erection of the Saline Savings Bank, which was completed May 1, 1917. Another store on the opposite corner, was that of William H. Davenport, who later started the first bank in Saline.

In 1865 a company of representative men of the village was formed to manufacture salt. A derrick was erected on the farm known later as the Ruckman place and three attempts made, then drilling stopped and it was thought that a rival company had bribed the contractor. In 1943 when the grandson, Harry Finch, was working in the field, he felt the earth begin to give way and he jumped from the tractor. The earth had caved in over old boards covering the casing of wells, with pipes still visible, proof that drilling hadtaken place there as old timers had claimed.

Schuyler Haywood came from Barnegat, New Jersey, in 1845 and built a mill on the west side of the river on the Turnpike. Soon a saw mill, blacksmith shop, cooper shop, stores and industries began to operate there, and it seemed that Barnegat would become a village, for the hill separating it from Saline was a natural barrier, being so steep that wheels on conveyances had to be chained in order to make a safe descent. After factory-made articles could be purchased, gradually only the mill remained, which was operated and remained in the John Klein family for seventy years. In 1937 it was purchased by Henry Ford, restored, and used for processing soy beans when that industry prospered around Saline. Since 1954 the mill has been used as a summer theatre.

Saline became an incorporated village October 18, 1866, with

Charles Howe Wallace, son of the pioneer hotel owner, as president for the first six years.

The stage coach was replaced by a railroad from Ypsilanti to Hillsdale, which was completed as far as Saline in 1870, when round trip rides to Ypsilanti were given on the Fourth of July. The junction at Pittsfield allowed transfer to north and south bound trains, so travel in any direction was then possible, also freight shipments faster. A spur of the Detroit to Jackson electric line was built from Ypsilanti in 1899 and free rides for everyone celebrated the event. With a two hour schedule, this enabled Saline people to shop and attend concerts and the theatre, and also allowed many to commute to attend the Normal or Cleary College, who would not otherwise have been able to do so.

There was entertainment in pioneer days, not as we know it, but enjoyable nevertheless. Strange as it may seem, the cemetery, which was called Oakwood, was a gathering place on Sunday afternoons, where villagers congregated at the graves of loved ones and exchanged neighborhood news. The Fourth of July was always celebrated, with a parade, often games or dancing, and always closed with fireworks.

The observance July 4, 1840, was described by Silas Mead who later married Harriette Risdon, in a letter to his sister in Connecticut. He described a program in the Baptist Church with Orange Risdon as orator of the day, then a parade on the principal street, after which they had a bountiful dinner served at two long tables set in the street, and they had "all the variety that the country could afford. All was decorated with flowers. The ladies soon appropriated them to their bright bosoms. There was good tea and coffee, but no liquor was allowed to sparkle upon the board." After this thirteen toasts were given by leading citizens; that delivered by the president of the day, Orange Risdon, Esquire, is as appropriate today as it was then. He said, "The United States of America, the greatest country of the world. May she still continue to shine in light, knowledge and liberty with the same increasing refulgence that she has shown from infancy to the present time." A display of fireworks concluded the celebration.

The Centennial was observed too, and a description was recorded in an interview with the late George Barr. July 4, 1876, found the village of Saline a four corner village but its patriotism and enthusiasm unequalled. First there was a parade led by the village band in uniform, riding in their new band wagon drawn by two teams of white horses. The band wagon was an elegant affair, made in the shop of Schairer Bros.: it was in the form of a serpent, the driver's seat at the head and seats for the band on the coils of the body. The sides were carved to represent scales and it had been decorated and gilded by the painter Fred Corden. The band was followed by veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic, carrying their "Wiltsie Post" flag with 36 stars. In the afternoon a dance was held on an outdoor pavillion, which was followed by fireworks in the evening.

Saline had been increasing in size and population, and considerable business was transacted here. As all article of cotton, wool, wood and iron were hand made, there were shops and stores of

all kinds, even a hairdresser with a window display of wigs and switches. The Schairer Bros., John, George & Aaron, made fine buggies and carriages where the Robison and Johnson Co. and adjoining gas station now stand on West Michigan; a foundry made windmills and farm implements where St. Paul's Church is located, and the large Helber Tannery is now the Sellen and Collins property. A newspaper had been started in 1870, but was not successful or in steady publication until George Nissly became the editor in 1880, then owner, and it has continued through the years as the Saline Observer under different ownerships.

On May 21, 1881, a disastrous fire destroyed the entire block of stores and shops from the Methodist Church to the alley by the present Uphaus Bldg. Since all buildings were of wood, the efforts of the bucket brigade were futile and the entire town was for a while in danger. Gradually the stores were rebuilt of brick and have changed little in appearance since that time. In 1887 the Wallace Block, which had the Opera House on the second floor and stores below, (including the post office now) was erected by Edwin Wallace, the former stage coach driver who had also been sheriff of Washtenaw County.

William H. Davenport, who had become a prosperous business man, recognized the need for adequate fire protection, so while on a business trip to New York City, he purchased three pieces of equipment, including an engine pumped by hand, and cisterns were dug to contain water piped from nearby roofs.

The dairy industry in the rich farming area around Saline was started in 1902 when E. A. Hauser built the Saline Creamery, the building purchased a few years ago by the Universal Die and Mfg. Co. Mr. Hauser also founded and owned the Telephone Co. and it remained in the family of his sister, Mrs. Ella Henne, with his nephew as manager, after whose death it was sold to the present operators, the General Telephone Company, in 1940.

Aside from those connected with church activities, the first club in the area was known as the Farmer's Club, composed of farmers and wives from Saline and neighboring townships. Their Constitution stated its purpose as follows: "The object of this association shall be the improvement of its members pertaining to the farm, garden and household, and for its intellectual advancement and social improvement." Many well known names appeared on its membership roll, including Henry Platt and the parents of the late Joseph Warner.

The Masonic Lodge had been organized in Saline in 1861, and the Order of the Eastern Star was founded in 1902 in the home of Dr. and Mrs. J. B. Wallace. The Library Association began in 1900 and one of its founders, Mrs. Fannie Unterkircher was also instrumental in organizing the Saline Womans Club. Now Saline has other organizations for service, instruction and entertainment, including the Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, J. C. C. and its Auxiliary, the American Legion and Auxiliary, and the Child Study Club.

Saline's first electric lights were turned on July 25, 1907, the franchise stating that lights would be turned on a half hour after sundown and burn until midnight unless it was moonlight,

but stores and homes could use them all night. Water works and a sewer system were installed during the administration of Frank Rose as village president between 1912 and 1916.

Saline village had been platted before the boundaries of the townships had been established, so the village included a small part of Lodi, Pittsfield and York townships, and it was necessary for voters to travel some distance to cast their ballots. To remove this inconvenience and to furnish other advantages, Saline became a fifth class city in 1931.

The youth of today can hardly envision the crude manner in which well known articles were produced or the hardships that the pioneers took as a matter of course. Yet they were cheerful, happy people. Living was simple, times were good, and when wages increased to a dollar a day, with wearing apparel and food at corresponding prices, everyone seemed prosperous. The qualities exemplified by the pioneers in founding Saline are preserved today by many of their descendants who are prominent in the business and social life of the community.

Saline has kept pace with other communities in modern improvements and utilities. Changes have taken place gradually, until now Saline has all the conveniences of a city, while retaining the spaciousness and neighborliness of a village.

Editor's Note:

After Mrs. Collins finished reading the foregoing paper to the Washtenaw Historical Society, she called on Mrs. Julia A. Catey to join her in informal reminiscence of old times and residents of Saline. Mrs. Catey has summarized their dialogue in the following paragraphs.

Outstanding Personalities of Former Days in Saline

Julia A. Catey

WILLIAM H. DAVENPORT was born in Genessee County, New York, October 22, 1826. His parents were Beverly and Gertrude (Foster) Davenport, natives of New York, who settled in Washtenaw County in 1827, locating at the "Grove", now within the city limits of Ypsilanti. Mr. Davenport's father lived but a few years after entering this county, and his remains were interred in the old cemetery at Ypsilanti. William H. subsequently removed to Saline, and when 12 years of age entered the employ of C. Vanhusan, as clerk. He was employed in mercantile pursuits for several years, and in February, 1851, entered into copartnership with H. J. Miller. They opened a "general store", and continued in business two years. Mr. Davenport then purchased Mr. Miller's interest.

In 1863-64 he built the three story Citizens Bank Building. The third floor was used by the Masonic Lodge. On the first floor he kept a general store. Day books recorded every item bought or sold from a paper of pins or a spool of thread to butter, eggs, and wool.

Later a private bank was operated by W.H. Davenport and son, Beverly. In 1902 it was reorganized with a capital of $20,000.00.

School days and former teachers of Saline were recalled.

Mrs. Fredrieka Josenhans McBride, Will Barr, and Grove Parsons were designated as living Senior Citizens of Saline.

Among the deceased citizens mentioned were: John Hull, Frank Jones, Lucius Pierce, Sela Fitzgerald, Dr. Hall, Vesta Mills, Charles Parsons, Will Derendinger, Nathan Bordine, Jacob Sturm, Charles Carven George Barr, Edward Hauser, Lottie Wallace, John McKinnon, Minnie Ruckman Daniel Nissley, Frank Rose, Ed Ford, George Brainard, and Sam Josenhans.

It seemed fitting at this time to pay a tribute to Mrs. Fannie Unterkircher, a life member of the Historical Society. She was born in Chicago in 1866 and passed away in March, 1956. She studied organ at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. Her father, Reverend Caldwell, was a Presbyterian minister and while he was a pastor in Saline, she played the organ there for fourteen years. Later she played in the Methodist Church for thirty-five years, directing the choir and organizing Senior and Junior Choirs and teaching pupils. She founded the Saline Library and the Saline Woman's Club, and was instrumental in bringing the Chautauqua to Saline, acting as Secretary.

In her will she left a $10,000.00 scholarship fund to the Saline High School to be known as the Charles F. Unterkircher Memorial Scholarship Fund. In addition, bequests were made to churches, clubs, civic organizations, and numerous friends and relatives.

Mrs. Unterkircher through her generosity and service has left an indelible impression on the life of the Saline Community.